



SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2009

Q&A with Greg Svenson

With Dave Arneson's recent passing, our hobby lost one of the most important links to its earliest, formative days. Arneson & Gygax will be forever remembered as the coauthors and founders of Dungeons & Dragons, but there is so much more to Mr. Arneson that we were never truly allowed to learn while growing up in the 70s, 80s and beyond while playing the game that his Blackmoor campaign spawned. I've read with wonder the stories that Greg "Svenny" Svenson shared with readers at his website before it was taken down*. As a player in the original Blackmoor campaign, Greg is one of only a handful of gamers who were present to witness the fledgling game sessions which eventually gave rise to the entire table top role-playing genre (and beyond).

I believe that remembering the magnitude of Dave Arneson's concept, and his Blackmoor campaign, is perhaps more timely now than ever before. As someone who is interested in the influences and inspirations that went into Mr. Arneson's Blackmoor campaign, I felt that being able to pose some questions to the Great Svenny himself might be an opportunity I couldn't pass up. I wasn't sure that my random email to his site's address would even be answered, let alone read considering that it was sent not long after Dave Arneson's passing. I had no idea that Greg had attended Dave's funeral, nor that he had delivered the eulogy. I was wary about pursuing this Q&A considering the nature of its less than appropriate timing, but Greg assured me that he would be happy to take a look at what I had drafted up and let me know what he thought of the idea.

During our various correspondences I learned that at the funeral Greg had seen another Blackmoor player from the early days, Stephen "Rocky" Rocheford**. Greg was able to later email Stephen and have him look over the answers below. Stephen was kind enough to confirm Greg's recollections of those events from the early 70s in the Twin Cities, before Dave Arneson had taken a position with TSR in Lake Geneva, WI in 1975.

My reasons for this Q&A were multiple, and I will let the answers speak for

ABOUT ME



SHAM AKA DAVE
GROGNARDISTAN

East Coast Gamer. One time Rabble-Rouser. Self styled D&D Grogard. God fearing Father of two. Happily married Man of many, many interests, too many to list. OK, really just D&D and ...Well, that's it really. D&D.

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themselves. I think that Greg did an outstanding job in answering these questions considering that nearly four decades have transpired since that very first Blackmoor game in 1971.

---Start Q&A---

Greg: I haven't really been interviewed like this before, so I shared my answers with one of the other guys who was one of the players on that original dungeon adventure in Dave Arneson's basement back in 1971, Stephen Rocheford (later known as St. Stephen from the Temple of the Frog adventure). He was probably just as active as a player as I was though the early years of the Blackmoor campaign and D&D. I saw him for the first time in over 25 years at Dave Arneson's funeral. He agreed with my answers to all of your questions except for the date when Dave Wesely got home from the Army which I have corrected in my answer.

Sham: First of all I'd like to thank Greg for taking the time to read and consider these questions, and allow me to share his responses for the readers of my web log. Greg, when did Dave Arneson actually begin his Blackmoor games, to the best of your knowledge? When and how were you introduced to Blackmoor?

Greg: You are welcome; hopefully I will be able to answer your questions. Nobody is really sure when we started playing Blackmoor. My recollection was that we played the first adventure over the Christmas holidays during the winter of 1970-1971; but, I am not really sure. The first documented Blackmoor game was on May 21, 1971. Dave Arneson found that in an old "Corner of the Table" newsletter article a few months ago. The "Corner of the Table" was Dave's newsletter for our Napoleonic campaign. Dave recently came across a complete set of them.

Sham: Were you around for Dave Wesely's Braunsteins that helped introduce the concept of role-playing and a referee? Was Dave Wesely a player in any of the Blackmoor sessions you were a part of?

Greg: No, I was not part of that. Wesely was in the Army Reserves and was activated and sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and later to Alaska during the early years of the Blackmoor campaign. He came home in the October/November 1973 timeframe. We did play together at least a few times when he was on leave as well as after he came home.

Sham: I've theorized that the concept which Dave Arneson formulated was based on a combination of wargame combat simulation, the ongoing wargame style campaign, the role-play/referee idea that Wesely introduced, and fantasy/medieval inspiration. In other words, wargaming meets role-play meets fantasy. Do you have any thoughts to offer on this assessment?

Beyond
Monster Business
Bleak Beyond Bestiary
Bleak Beyond Random
Monsters
d6 Dungeon Rooms
100 NPC Types
doo Stairways
Dungeon Treasure Maps
Dismal Depths 1A
Dismal Depths 1B
Dismal Depths 1C
Dismal Depths 1D
Dismal Depths Traps Tables
Revised Magic Swords
Determination
Time in the Game
Treasure Tables
w/o WALLS
w/o WALLS Fill-in Template
w/o WALLS Level Example
Sham's OPD Template
Example OPD
Sham's Solstice Tiddlywiki

ODDS AND ENDS
D&D Cover to Cover Mega-
Click
Dim Expanse Clicky
Empty Room Principle
Entourage Approach
Memories of Games Past (S1,
ToH)
OD&D and Rock
One Page Dungeons Idea
Q&A with Greg Svenson
Schools of Thought
The Real History of RPGs
Treasure Maps
What Price Glory
Why OD&D Clicky

Greg: Well, that's basically true, but it really isn't that simple. The fantasy/medieval elements of Blackmoor were totally new to me at the time (although, I had read Tolkien and some other fantasy literature). However, in the Napoleonic campaign that we had been playing before that first adventure was a combination of miniatures and diplomacy. Dave Arneson was the referee and each of the players represented the sovereign, a political faction, a general and/or an admiral in their respective countries. So, for the campaign we would try to correspond player to player and write battle reports "in character". We were responsible for our nation's diplomacy and even the national budget down to buying food, forage, powder and shot, as well as running the military campaigns and fighting the battles that came about as a result of our actions...We had also been playing "Fight in the Skies" where each player was a WWI fighter pilot tracking his missions and kills and getting better with experience. Before I joined Dave Arneson's gaming group my home gaming group in Excelsior, Minnesota had been playing Korn's*** for several years. Korn's was a set of WWII rules where each player was a single soldier and we had a referee keeping track of both sides and resolving actions as the game progressed, at least that was the way we played it. I am sure that others in the group had similar gaming background experiences to mine.

Sham: Your character rose to great prominence in Dave's Blackmoor campaign. Your character, The Great Svenny, is now a full fledged legendary NPC in published Blackmoor games. What would be the Great Svenny's proudest moment during those many Blackmoor sessions? Aside from the Great Svenny's accomplishments, what are some of your favorite memories from Dave's Blackmoor games?

Greg: Yes, I have been startled to surf the internet and find web sites where they described how the Great Svenny was involved with that gaming groups adventures. That was a really weird experience for me...The two greatest moments that stick out in my memory are the two adventures I described on my website; surviving the first dungeon adventure and the raid on the lair of Fred Funk's Orc tribe on the 10th level of Blackmoor dungeon. I participated in literally hundreds of adventures between early 1971 and 1975, but those are the two I have the clearest memories of. I hardly even remember the famous "Temple of the Frog" and "Valley of the Ancients" adventures. I know I was there, but they were not as memorable for me.

Sham: For how many years did you play as The Great Svenny in Blackmoor, and what exactly is the Great Svenny up to at this very moment?

Greg: I was actively playing Svenny from the beginning up until when Dave Arneson moved to Lake Geneva to work for TSR in 1975. I played with him again at GenCon in 1976 and at a reunion game in 1991. When I started gaming with Dave again in Orlando in 1999, I played Svenny's



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BLOG ARCHIVE

► 2012 (1)
► 2011 (20)
► 2010 (14)
▼ 2009 (112)
 ► December (1)
 ► September (1)
 ► August (10)
 ► July (10)
 ► June (10)
▼ May (10)
 [Q&A with Greg Svenson](#)
 [Fight On! Keeps Fighting On!](#)

son, Sol, although I called him Svenny Junior at first, until I put together Svenny's family history. I am currently playing Sol in an online play by post game (the Tomb of Rahotep in honor of Gary Gygax on the Wayfarer's Inn website). I have also been playing one of his grandchildren, Sven, in another play by post game (the Grim Winter campaign on the Zeitgeist Games MMRPG website)...Svenny is currently the Lord High Regent of the Regency Council of the Kingdom of Blackmoor in the D&D 3.5 Edition version of the Blackmoor campaign. I am currently working out what Svenny's family would look like for the D&D 4th Edition Blackmoor campaign which is set some 270 years later.

Sham: In reading your stories of those early Blackmoor days, I learned that certain important monsters or villains were often controlled by other players. Was there ever a point in Dave's Blackmoor games where the emphasis became the adventuring group, or was it usually adversarial between the players who mostly pursued their own individual goals?

Greg: We switched from the good guys versus the bad guys sessions to just one adventuring group fairly quickly. We realized that it was more fun if everyone was on one team working together. There were still people playing the bad guys, but that was usually in their own gaming sessions separate from the ones I was in; although, sometimes Dave would still ask for a volunteer to play the monster during a battle.

Sham: I'm aware that Blackmoor was much more than simply a dungeon crawl, but I enjoyed your telling of the First Dungeon Adventure and how your character survived it. After that adventure did the dungeon setting become a major focus of the campaign?

Greg: Well, we stopped making dungeon maps when the group realized that I had much of the dungeon memorized. Of course, that led to problems when Svenny was incapacitated and unable to tell everyone how to get back out of the dungeon. It was the major emphasis for a while, but we quickly moved out into the wilderness. We also had a period of several months, after some of us read the "Tarnsman of Gor" books, where we were traveling around on tarns (think of Rocs in the "Lord of the Rings"). That was after Gary Gygax had started his campaign because one of our adventures was to travel to Grayhawk on tarnback to rescue Gary's players who had gotten into trouble.

Sham: I understand that as you gained knowledge and experience playing in Dave's game you also took some turns behind the referee's screen, running Blackmoor adventures for other players. What was that like? And do you ever have the opportunity to play or run Blackmoor these days?

Greg: In the fall of 1972 Dave Arneson gave me some of his notes and let me referee a couple of times when he was busy with other things.

Never Would've
Guessed...Gene Wolfe
Friday Flashback
One Page Dungeons
The Miscellaneum of
Cinder
Knockspell #2
Conceptually Speaking
Thanks Steve
Of Wombats and Zipper
Arms

- April (11)
- March (16)
- February (17)
- January (26)

- 2008 (197)

LABELS

3d6 (6)
anecdotal (7)
arneson (7)
bleak beyond (7)
chapter one (1)
cover to cover (44)
dice (5)
dim expanse (19)
dismal depths (27)
empty room (8)
friday flashback (35)
gary (4)
genre (36)
Get Well Steve (1)
junk (10)
Lair of Sham (1)
leap year (1)
links (27)
maps (8)
meetup (1)
mmo (4)
mt. rushmore (3)
no future (5)

Dave tells me that I was the third DM ever. Later I developed a town called Tonisborg, complete with two dungeons. I didn't think that I was very good at it. I guess I was comparing myself to Dave. At any rate, I didn't DM very often; although, I must have DMed more often than I remember from what Bob Meyer has told me about the days when we were roommates in 1973 & 1974. Unfortunately, I loaned my Tonisborg materials to a friend to use for a game day and he never returned them, which was around 1980 or so when I lived in Boston. I have not run any Blackmoor (or other D&D) games since the early 1980's when I ran games for my church's youth group.

Sham: Would you say that Blackmoor evolved, in both rules content and as a campaign world, as a result of the player/character courses of action?

Greg: Of course, it evolved and very quickly. Using Chainmail rules on the first adventure, when you got hit the first time you were dead. We didn't like that much, so the next time we played we had hit points. Within a month Dave introduced armor classes. There were many changes over time. One time when we were off adventuring the bad guys attacked and captured the then defenseless town of Blackmoor, leveling Zvenzen's Freehold among other things. We all got banished to the swamps of Loc Gloomin for that one...

Sham: While refereeing Blackmoor for other players, how did you handle actions by the characters which were not covered by the rules? Was referee ad-libbing a vital aspect of the Blackmoor games?

Greg: I quickly came up with what the possibilities might be and either had the players roll dice against a related character attribute for success or on a table I made up in my head on the fly. This was an area that I felt I was not very good at, however, because Dave would just tell us to roll the dice and he then told us what happened.

Sham: You were playing in Blackmoor before D&D was published, and again afterwards. What impact did the release of that version of the rules have upon Dave's personal campaign?

Greg: As soon as a draft was available we started play testing with them, but I don't think it really changed how the game went when Dave was the DM. That's just my opinion. The big difference was that others (like me) were more easily able to DM. All of the sessions I DMed were part of the same Blackmoor campaign that Dave was running. Often I was helping players get to a higher level so they could survive with the other higher level players.

Sham: What was Dave's early opinion of TSR's 1974 D&D game? For that matter, what was the general opinion of you and the other players in Blackmoor when you finally saw the original D&D game?

no label (10)
ODD Bits (6)
old school (89)
one page (4)
philosophy (35)
preview (30)
prodler and scrunt (1)
project x (8)
retread (2)
review (3)
sessions (5)
sixth table (3)
solstice (48)
thanks (1)
theory (38)
thief (4)
three-headed monster (3)
what price glory (8)
whimsey (14)
why? (6)
zines (3)

Greg: Dave was excited about it, but I am not sure what he actually thought about it, I don't remember him ever talking to me about it in that way. I thought it was one and the same thing with what we had already been doing for several years. So, I didn't really see much of a difference.

Sham: I've developed great respect for Dave's impact to the gaming world. In my opinion he is often unfairly discredited in certain quarters for his lack of actual input to D&D. If you can recall, what were the major differences between Dave's Blackmoor, and D&D in 1974?

Greg: Like I just said, I thought they were one and the same. They had just been organized, to make it easier for other people to use to run games. The individual levels and things like that were new, but the way we played we didn't really notice the difference. Attributes were different, we had used two d6's to get a number from 1 to 10, where we changed to three d6's and a range from 3 to 18, but most were just changes in mechanics...We were not keeping our own records or character sheets as they are called now. Dave had an index card on each of the players (and NPCs) with their attributes, HP, possessions and other useful notes. I only remember seeing Svenny's character card a couple of times. Unfortunately, it never occurred to me to copy the information off of it for my own records. Dave told me a few months ago that he had been going through one of his boxes and discovered what he thought were all of our original character cards. I don't know what happened to them after that, however.

Sham: From what I gather Dave's major accomplishment was combining the essential elements of what was to become fantasy role-playing with Blackmoor, the same elements that were subsequently found in D&D. Would you agree that each of the essential elements was present in pre-D&D Blackmoor?

1. Characters

Greg: Yes, of course.

2. Ability Scores

Greg: Yes. I am not sure when Dave added them since he kept our character cards, but we were definitely using them during the spring of 1972, because I have definite memories involving ability scores that happened before I went away for the summer of 1972.

3. Hit Points

Greg: Yes, within the first month.

4. Experience/Levels

Greg: Yes, although handled differently. Fighters went from flunky to hero to superhero. We didn't track our experience points as is done now. Dave simply told us when we had transitioned from one level to another. I do not know if wizards and clerics had different levels of ability or not.

5. Mechanics/Randomization

Greg: Yes, but again handled differently. Sometimes, we would roll against our related ability to resolve a task. Other times Dave would just say we were successful or not after we had described what we intended to do (he might have made a roll at the time, it may or may not have had any bearing in what happened).

6. Adventuring Groups

Greg: Yes, the first adventure involved two groups.

7. Exploration

Greg: Yes, we didn't have maps of the area. Anytime we traveled we had to find our way, even just leaving the town of Blackmoor itself and going into the nearby countryside was a major adventure. Part of the adventure was getting lost. Sometimes that was the adventure.

8. Hazards/Challenges

Greg: Yes, problem solving was a big part of our gaming sessions, really the major part.

9. Treasure

Greg: Yes, we found money, stuff and magic items in the lairs of the monsters we killed.

10. Fantasy Setting

Greg: Yes

Sham: I'd also like to specifically ask about certain D&D features and whether or not they were present in the early Blackmoor games, to the best of your recollection.

1. Saving Throws

Greg: Yes, maybe with different mechanics. Dave just told us to roll and he would tell us what happened...

2. Clerics vs. Undead (Turning Undead)

Greg: Mike Carr**** played the Bishop of Blackmoor pretty much from the beginning. I think of him as being able to heal and on one or two occasions resurrect the dead. I do not recall when turning the undead came into it, but it was not a concept that was unfamiliar to me, either. I have to say that I am not sure.

3. Wandering Monsters

Greg: They were there from the first adventure on. We could see Dave rolling before he would announce an encounter.

4. Alignment

Greg: Absolutely, we had good and evil characters in the very first dungeon adventure; in fact, Dave's perception of our alignment, as it is called now, affected whether we were able to hold the magic sword we found during that first adventure. Several of the players were injured when they picked it up. In fact, I was the only player who didn't try to pick it up. I was afraid to try after seeing what happened to the other unsuccessful players. When I was the last one standing and the battle was over, I picked it up and wrapped it using a piece of leather, so that I would not come in contact with it and then carried it out of the dungeon and immediately sold it to the baron of Blackmoor for a whopping 150 GP.

5. Spell Levels

Greg: I was never a magic user in the original campaign, so I don't really know the mechanics of how spells were handled. Pete Gaylord, Kurt Krey or Richard Snider would have a much better idea of how that worked.

6. Henchmen/Hirelings

Greg: Yes, after Svenny became a "super hero" I was able to hire soldiers and servants. That was how we were able to staff Zvenzen's Freehold, for example. Slavery was also an option, at least initially. Svenny bought a slave once.

Sham: What was it about D&D that made it such a smashing success, in your opinion?

Greg: The limitless options for the players made it so much fun that it was hard not to enjoy yourself even when your character died in the adventure.

Sham: What other role-playing games have you had the chance to run or play in? Do you have a favorite role-playing game besides Blackmoor?

Greg: Blackmoor is the only D&D setting I have ever run a game in. I have especially enjoyed "Space: 1889" and "Traveller" (CT, MT and T4). I have played many others, including "Powers and Perils", "Adventures in Fantasy", "Shadowrun", "Star Wars", "GURPS" (fantasy, Traveller & WW2) and "Twilight: 2000".

Sham: What do you feel Dave Arneson's legacy to the hobby will be? Furthermore, what do you feel Dave Arneson's legacy to the hobby should be?

Greg: To me, Dave Arneson is the father of modern role-playing games. They didn't really exist before we played Blackmoor. They were a new concept at the time and he is the person who put it all together.

Sham: Have you ever worked in the role-playing field, or has it always been simply an entertaining diversion? What details can you tell the readers about yourself since those days playing in Blackmoor with Dave Arneson?

Greg: Not really, I made an attempt to edit John Snider's "Star Empires" RPG rules back in 1983 for Adventure Games while I was working for 4D Interactive Systems (both companies were primarily owned by Dave Arneson) as a video game programmer, but it never got published. John had written it back in the mid-1970s and it had languished at TSR for years. By the time I looked at it, it was really out dated, although, in my opinion, if it had come out before or at the same time as "Traveller" it would have taken the Sci-Fi RPG market hands down...As for me, I am a computer geek. I have been in Information Systems/Technology for over thirty-two years. I spent a year and a half writing video games for 4D Interactive Systems back in '83 and '84. The rest of the time I have been with large companies, mostly in the aerospace industry. I am a Christian. The Lord has been very good to me. I am married to a wonderful woman, Paula. We have five children and two grandchildren.

Sham: Greg, thank you for taking the time to answer my questions, including the many D&D related inquiries. My goal has been to not only learn more about the early Blackmoor games, and your role in helping shape that famous campaign, but to also further the legacy of Dave Arneson and remind readers of his impact on our hobby. Are there any details about Dave Arneson that you would like to share with the readers?

Greg: You are welcome. I am glad that I was able to answer most of your questions. With Dave's passing, I have had lots of chances to think about him. His daughter asked me to do the eulogy at his funeral service, so I have thought a lot about his life. Dave was a humble man. I never saw him push his agenda at someone else's expense or put himself ahead of others. He was always concerned about other peoples well

being. He wanted everyone to be happy and have fun. He was generous and thoughtful, both with me and my family. My wife thought of him as a kind and gallant gentleman. He wanted to live at peace with everyone. I know that in the last few years he attempted to reconcile with those who had issues with him, including Gary Gygax and Tim Kask.

I hope you and your readers are edified by reading this.

---End Q&A---

I'd like to thank Greg, as well as Stephen, for taking the time to answer these questions about not only Blackmoor, but also about their good friend Dave Arneson who sadly left us far too early. It was very touching to read Greg's heartfelt answer to my last question, and I hope that readers can come away from this Q&A with a better appreciation of not only Dave Arneson's legacy, but also of the man himself.

* - Per an email from Greg, his early Blackmoor stories will once again be available as they are to be hosted at Havard's Blackmoor site in the near future. Stephen and Greg have just started collaborating on the First Dungeon Adventure story in order to bring back even more of the details. In the meantime you can read Greg Svenson's First Dungeon Adventure in *Fight On!* Issue 2.

** - Stephen Rocheford had the perhaps singular honor of actually reviewing Dave Arneson's original manuscript, detailing Blackmoor, before it was sent off to TSR and transformed into Dungeons & Dragons.

*** - Michael F. Korn's *Modern War in Miniature*, 1966.

**** - Mike Carr, designer of *Fight in the Skies*, author of *B1: In Search of the Unknown*, Editor of *AD&D Monster Manual*, *Player's Handbook*, and *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

~Sham, Quixotic Referee

POSTED BY SHAM AKA DAVE AT 8:06 AM

LABELS: ARNESON, GENRE, OLD SCHOOL, THEORY

45 COMMENTS:



Timeshadows said...

> all teary-eyed <

Thank you, Sham.

MAY 30, 2009 AT 10:36 AM



Fitzerman said...

Very good interview. It's important to get these stories down. I wonder,

with the passing of both Gyga and Arneson and thus the "gag-order", whether it will be possible to ferret out the details of the infamous lawsuit (or settlement or whatever it was) from the early 80s? Perhaps one of Arneson's players would be willing divulge what they know?

MAY 30, 2009 AT 12:05 PM



Santiago said...

Fantastic interview! I agree... these stories are treasures to be hunted, for the better comprehension and enjoyment of our hobby!

MAY 30, 2009 AT 12:44 PM

Anonymous said...

The gag order applied to us too. Dave could not answer my questions about the lawsuit, either.

Greg

MAY 30, 2009 AT 12:53 PM



Amityville Mike said...

Thank you for this, Dave, and thank you, Greg for agreeing to participate.

Every anecdote or snippet of history is like another fleeting glimpse into a world that, despite having been so influential in my life, still remains shaded by the dearth of information available about the origins of the hobby from those who were there.

MAY 30, 2009 AT 1:38 PM

Doc said...

This was a really, really good post! A very informative peek into the origins of our hobby. Thank you Sham and Greg. I think that this should be posted on the OD&D Discussion board.

Doc

MAY 30, 2009 AT 1:48 PM



Fitzerman said...

It's a shame, the lawsuit was a seminal event in the hobby's early history. I suppose at some point someone will have to devote some real energy to reconstructing its particulars.

MAY 30, 2009 AT 2:15 PM



Ripper X said...

Only seven comments for something this awesome? We should be ashamed of ourselves. This is an excellent piece Sham, thank you so

much for both thinking to do it, and for sharing it with us.

MAY 30, 2009 AT 4:28 PM



Ragnorakk said...

Wow - thanks.

MAY 30, 2009 AT 6:18 PM



newadventuresinfantasyfiction said...

Top interview, Sham. Nice one.

MAY 30, 2009 AT 6:31 PM



Andreas Davour said...

Great reading. Thanks Greg!

MAY 30, 2009 AT 9:12 PM



Link said...

This comment has been removed by a blog administrator.

MAY 31, 2009 AT 5:01 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

It was my pleasure to conduct this Q&A. It wasn't an "interview" proper, as one can see. I called it a Q&A because I just compiled and emailed Greg a long list of questions.

Greg came back with the great answers all of you have been able to read. Thanks go to Greg, and also Stephen for his review of the Q&A.

Timeshadows: My pleasure.

Fitzerman: As far as I can gather, we had a pay-out, a severance from the brand, and gag orders all around. This allowed TSR to continue with the D&D name unabated, and Dave was fated to slowly fade in the memory of gamers. In the grand scheme of things it wasn't that much longer until Gary suffered the same fate, and now both names have become dwarfed by the brand itself.

Zulgyan: Thank you! I hope to discover more Twin Cities stories.

MAY 31, 2009 AT 8:18 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

Greg: Thanks for the information. I didn't even think to pursue the lawsuit angle, but I assumed this was the case.

Mike: Thanks and I agree. I do believe there is interest in these

memories, and for the most part the individuals involved are still around. Probably unaware of geeky fans like me who eat this stuff up.

Doc: Thank you and a fine suggestion! I'll include a link over at Fin's place.

MAY 31, 2009 AT 8:23 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

Fitzerman: I'd sure like to know more if possible.

Ripper X: Thanks very much. The combination of Saturday and a very long post might contribute to this. I appreciate your comment!

Ragnorakk: You're most welcome.

MAY 31, 2009 AT 8:37 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

Newadventures: Thanks. This was my first try at it, and I'm glad you found it interesting.

Andreas: Glad you enjoyed it. Yes, and again, this post belongs more to Greg than I!

Deleted: Removed home decorating spam (lol).

MAY 31, 2009 AT 8:40 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

Update: In my haste I glossed over some of the names involved. For the interest of all readers, a new footnote for Mike Carr is being added momentarily!

MAY 31, 2009 AT 9:04 AM



finarvyn said...

Fantastic "interview" Sham/Dave!

As time passes we lose more and more of these stories and the history of the game we all love. Thank you for helping us preserve some of this!

MAY 31, 2009 AT 11:10 AM



DuBeers said...

Wow. Just ... wow. Thanks to Sham and "The Great Svenny" for bringing us this information.

MAY 31, 2009 AT 11:37 AM



Matthew James Stanham said...

Interesting stuff, thanks to Dave for asking and Greg for answering, as well as everybody else who contributed.

Dave, though, you did not ask about hit dice? I think I know the likely answer to the question from what I gather from the interview, but I would love to know if hit dice were part of proto *Dungeons & Dragons*.

MAY 31, 2009 AT 8:44 PM



shimrod said...

Outstanding Q&A. I've read a bunch of posts and info by Greg in the last few months, and have felt very grateful for his level of energy and interest in passing on his experiences and his knowledge. Thanks very much for expanding it even further.

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 12:01 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Finarvyn: Glad you found it interesting. I'd love to be able to compile more Twin Cities stuff in the future.

DuBeers: Thanks! I was wowed when I first saw the depth with which Greg answered my questions. Greg is just a good guy.

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 12:37 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Matthew: Ack. I knew there would be something I forgot to touch on. I kind of rolled HD into Exp/Levels, but that's not quite where I wanted it. I might have an answer for you soon, if one is to be had.

Shimrod: Thanks. Yes, Greg is an outstanding source of information on a topic which very few know much about. There are numerous others out there who played with Dave, Stephen and Greg, but whether or not they remember or care to do so is another matter.

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 12:41 PM



Chgowiz said...

@Sham - you rock! This was a fantastic interview - this should go into FO/KS or some format for print and saving off for historical reasons. Very nice to see some good anecdotes by people who were there!

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 4:58 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Chgo: Thanks! If Greg agreed to it, I'd be willing to clean it up for a fanzine. Maybe remove some of my more conceptual/mechanics

questions and focus on the story itself. However, I do think it is important to see how close Blackmoor was to D&D conceptually, but I'm not sure if I like the "bullet point" topics portion of the Q&A.

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 6:23 PM



Brunomac said...

Very very awesome.

In game terms I am more of a "heart" man than a "head" man. And Dave A. was certainly the heart of D&D.

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 7:59 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Thanks, Brunomac. I've never been able to identify whom I'm most like in game terms. Both had their strong suits, and by all accounts both were excellent DMs.

JUNE 1, 2009 AT 8:15 PM



Matthew James Stanham said...

Ack. I knew there would be something I forgot to touch on. I kind of rolled HD into Exp/Levels, but that's not quite where I wanted it. I might have an answer for you soon, if one is to be had.

Cool. In the spirit of "reminding you on" be sure to ask if they indicated saving throws and fighting ability, surely one of cleverest design features of the game. :)

I do not really expect Greg will know the answer, given some of his related responses here, but worth asking! My feeling is that hit dice originated as "equivalent to X number of normal men", so it seems likely to me that it was a development from the *Chainmail Fantasy Supplement*.

JUNE 2, 2009 AT 10:00 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

Matthew: I get the feeling that Blackmoor really was very immersive for the players, and the fact that the mechanics were mostly behind the screen probably helped maintain the role-play over rules element.

I'll paraphrase the answer I got from Greg: ...before we started play testing the D&D rules in 1973 Dave tracked that kind of stuff behind the scenes, so we were not really aware of how it was done.

I'd agree with your educated guess, that it likely began in a rudimentary form imported from the Fantasy Supplement to *Chainmail*.

JUNE 2, 2009 AT 8:53 PM



Matthew James Stanham said...

Another quick question, Dave. Can you find out if they were using D20s in *Blackmoor* or 2d6 to make attack rolls and saving throws? I recall a post by GygaX where he seemed very concerned that people understand the significance of a d20 versus 2d6 for how modifiers affect the outcome. It sounded to me like it was one of "his ideas", but maybe not.

Pass on my thanks to Greg for taking the time to answer these follow up questions.

JUNE 2, 2009 AT 9:26 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Something I discovered doing research recently is that David Wesely, a member of the Twin Cities crew, is often credited for introducing polyhedrals to wargaming. If anything, I would suspect that the Lake Geneva guys were introduced to the d20, and not the other way around. I'll have to ask Greg if he remembers.

I'd even go so far as to suggest that the Blackmoor system is the one that became the Alternative Combat System in OD&D. It certainly would've been in TSR's and Gary's interests to promote the use of Chainmail as much as possible (even if Dave had devised a new system using the d20).

I recall reading that the original Blackmoor system featured lower is better rolls to hit. One had to match the target's AC to score a hit. That doesn't answer the question, but hitting AC 2 with a d20 is much more reasonable than with 2d6, something along the lines of 10% vs 2.78%.

If this is in fact the case, it would seem that Gary is the one who created the confusing (to modern eyes) high roll to hit low AC system. At least with Blackmoor it was a low-low system.

JUNE 2, 2009 AT 10:38 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Oh, and the low-low system could've dispensed with attack matrices, like modern D&D, more readily. But I'll avoid delving too far into my opinions on combat and formulae here, I've made them known already.

Besides, you pointed out before the unique way in which modifiers function in the high-low system, and I do find some merit in that view. Now D&D uses a high-high system. All three are the same thing. Toss in THACo as a fourth, even though it's no more than a short-cut high-low formula.

The least logical is of course the high-low. I take that back, the as of yet never used low-high system is just as illogical.

Bah, I need to divorce myself from such trivialities.

JUNE 2, 2009 AT 10:53 PM



Matthew James Stanham said...

That sounds interesting. I have definitely read an interview with Gygax where he in no uncertain terms took the credit for introducing polyhedral dice into adventure gaming.

A low-low system sounds as though things were being conceived of in percentage terms, as it is more natural for people (in my subjective opinion) to want to roll under a probability of success than over a probability of failure.

That said, a 2d6 roll to hit an AC is not that unreasonable if multiple dice are being used [e.g. heroes roll 4d6 and choose the two lowest] or other sorts of adjustment [e.g. +1 or more being applied to the armour class as target number].

Food for thought!

JUNE 3, 2009 AT 12:43 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

Matthew: Not unreasonable at all! I play with these numbers and odds quite often.

Anyway, I was partially right but mostly WRONG with my speculating, so here's Greg's answer to set the record straight:

"Dave Wesely found the multisided dice and showed them to Gary Gygax, who incorporated them into the D&D rules. Dave Arneson told me he (Wesely) found a set of multisided dice when he went to England in 1968 (which was before I met him), but I never saw Dave's (Wesely's) earlier set of multisided dice. Before I saw my first published set of rules, I had never seen the multisided dice."

I will say that clearly Dave Arneson had some form of Alternate Combat System of his own for the draft he sent to Gary. He had already introduced Armor Class bolted on from a Naval wargame, so logically there was an accompanying mechanic that showed how to hit it (which might have been the low-low thing).

I'll have to try and remember where I read that low-low thing. It was in a report from someone who played in an Arneson game at a Con.

JUNE 3, 2009 AT 4:35 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

It seems I fudged up the answer a bit when relating this information from Greg. Here's the clarified version. My apologies to Greg for not sharing this information properly the first time:

"It was Dave Arneson who went to England and found a set of multisided dice in 1968, which I never saw. I do not know if Dave Arneson ever used that earlier set of multisided dice for our games or what happened to them. Wesley found the multisided dice in an educational supply catalog and showed them to Gary Gygax, who used them for D&D. I do not know when Dave Wesley showed the multisided dice to Gary Gygax, but it probably had no direct relation to D&D."

Thanks again Greg! You've been a priceless source of information and answers.

JUNE 4, 2009 AT 10:41 AM



Matthew James Stanham said...

Understood. That sounds fairly close to Gygax's version. Either he forgot or omitted Wesley's role in showing him the catalogue (or Wesley misremembers), but either way there must have been a reason for either showing him it, or the idea forming when he saw it. Presumably, as a group, they were looking for flatter and longer probability generators for the game.

I cannot seem to dig up the interview in question, but the crux of things was "I was looking through a school supply catalogue". That obviously does not rule out Wesley's involvement; indeed, it explains why he was looking through it! :D

I often think that this late development are why so many mechanics rules use 1d6, such as surprise, initiative, secret doors, traps, *etcetera*.

Thanks again to Greg for taking the time to answer, and to yourself for asking!

JUNE 4, 2009 AT 1:09 PM



Sham aka Dave said...

No problem, Matthew. Greg has been more than generous with his time and always gracious even when I misquoted him a few comments back.

And the names he keeps dropping from that Twin Cities crew are really making me wish we'd see a book or the edited Dragons in the Basement, or better yet, both.

JUNE 4, 2009 AT 3:27 PM



Matthew James Stanham said...

Hey Dave, just been catching up on my KotDT reading and what should I find in #150, but an article by Arneson on dice and the role they played in *Blackmoor*.

Apparently, he first used them for magic-users and sent a pair along with *Blackmoor* to Lake Geneva. By his own admission the story is subject to "poor recollection", but I thought that you would be interested if you hadn't yet seen KotDT #150.

JUNE 10, 2009 AT 2:48 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

I've not read an issue of KotDT. I always assumed it was nothing more than the strip itself. I visited the Kenzer site and I see there's much more to the magazine.

Interesting find, Matthew. Like so much else involving those early days, as Dave mentions, it is subject to poor recollection. I'm left assuming that the eventual use of polyhedral dice should be credited to Wesely, Arneson and Gygax.

JUNE 10, 2009 AT 8:31 AM



Matthew James Stanham said...

KotDT was pretty much my sole connection with the larger gaming community before I took an interest in the internet, playing a role that *Dragon* and *White Dwarf* had for me in the early nineties. Definitely worth my time and money, especially interesting to see how it reflects (or does not reflect) the trends perceptible in the online gaming community.

JUNE 10, 2009 AT 10:32 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

I'm tempted to check out KotDT. I've got too much to read as it is, but the details at the Kenzer site have piqued my interest.

JUNE 10, 2009 AT 11:36 AM

Anonymous said...

Great interview.

Svenny has better memories of the birth of *Blackmoor* and D&D than I do, as I was off in the Army from Oct70-Sep73.

Still-

To correct both Svenny the Great and Steve Rockford, my PCS from Alaska was 28AUG73, so I should have been back in the Twin Cities and

gaming in September, not October/November.

I used to conclude my "How I invented D&D and How I Didn't" talk by pointing out that M.J.Korns had also done a proto-RPG in his Modern War in Miniature, in 1966, before I did Braunstein. But I had not seen it before I did Braunstein, so it is not an ancestor of Braunstein, Blackmoor, Greyhawk and D&D, though it predates them. But it shows that I was not the only person creating RPGs at that time. Just like there were several people who built and flew "airplanes" before the Wright brothers. Korns and I were like Langley and Chanute, while Arneson was Orville or Wilbur, the guys who took Chanute's ideas and made them work 'Wright' :-).

Another correction for Svenny the Great: While I did indeed introduce polyhedral dice to gaming, it was long before we did RPGs or I met Gary. I did it in '65 by buying a set of Regular Polyhedra from Edmund Scientific. It was Bill Hoyt who later went to England and brought back the first 10-sided dice any of us had ever seen, bi-truncated octahedrons that were quite different from what most of us now think of as D10s. And yes, I did tell Gary, much later, where I was getting the funny dice from.

I got the dice because Totten had a table in Strategos; The American Game of War that called for a 12-sided tee-to-tum. I did not know what a 12-sided tee-to-tum was, but it occurred to me that it must be that 12-sided thingy they showed us in high school geometry class. SO I ordered the set of regular polyhedra from the school supply catalog, and we used the 12-sided one to fight Civil War battles with Strategos. A pair of D20s were useful for generating percentage rolls. Everyone in our group thought the funny dice were cool and when Blackmoor came along there were several sets around.

But there was a really strong reason to use 3D6 instead of 1D20 or 2D6 instead of 1D12: To get a D12 and D20 you paid Edmund Sci \$6.00 for a set with three other pretty useless dice (D4, D6, D8) while you could buy D6's (ordinary pip dice) at the drugstore for 5 cents. And I made \$250 for working the whole summer of '64 and you could buy 30 gallons of gas for \$6. So the funny dice were costing about \$90 a set in today's money.

I did not claim to have invented the D12, I figured that (1) the Pythagorean school of Alexandria invented the five regular polyhedra about 2000 years before Idid, and (2) Totten (or someone he copied) invented using the D12 as a dice in a game.

But in about 1990 I discovered that Totten was not using a D12 at all. I found a reprint of an 1828 parlor game that included a 12-sided tee-to-tum. SO I guess I can claim to have invented using the D4, D8, D12 and D20 polyhedra

as dice in games.

-David Wesely

JULY 24, 2009 AT 1:27 AM



Andreas Davour said...

Great to hear your part of things Dave!

JULY 24, 2009 AT 10:06 AM



Sham aka Dave said...

Yes indeed, it is great and enlightening to hear your side, David. To Greg's credit he normally starts his recollections by sharing the fact that the fog of time may cloud the exact details (and much of what you shared was before Greg was involved in the Twin Cities crew).

\$90 a set in todays money

A staggering sum! Even though gas is a bad analogy, the point is very well taken. Your \$250.00 in earnings gives a good measuring stick. Plainly put the preference for six-siders was not one of probabilities, but one of practicality.

I'd never considered this fact before.

Your point about the "cofounding" of RPGs is likewise insightful. I'd never heard of the Korn's game until I had the chance to do this Q&A with Greg, so it is interesting to hear your take on how RPGs came to be, as we now know them.

Thank you David for taking the time to share all of this information, I truly appreciate it.

JULY 24, 2009 AT 11:29 AM

Michael Brewer said...

Words cannot describe how cool it is to read this piece of history, it's like recovering a lost chapter from some ancient tome.

JULY 24, 2009 AT 1:27 PM

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